

Internal Boxing and Taoist Alchemy

by John D. Bracy

What does it mean when we say that a martial art style is "internal"? This is a question which Chinese martial arts enthusiasts frequently discuss. Inevitably varying viewpoints emerge which attempt to define "internal boxing." The description which I use involves the idea of Taoist alchemy. Alchemy has to do with a Taoist yogic tradition long established in Chinese culture. It focuses on the development of ch'i and bringing internal energy forces to balance in the body. This article will examine two viewpoints regarding "internal" martial arts and suggest the meaning of "internal" martial arts as describing a Taoist alchemical system.

The question of defining the meaning of internal martial arts has been addressed in several issues of the Pa Kua Chang Journal over the last couple of years. In Volume 2, Number 2 (Jan/Feb 92) Ken Fish challenged the use of applying the label "internal martial arts" to Tai Chi, Hsing-I, and Pa Kua as inaccurate. He argued that the inaccuracy was due to confusion with the term *nei kung* (literally "inner work") with *nei chia* (internal family/style). He defined *nei kung* as referring "to training of muscle groups, ligaments, and tendons not usually under conscious control." He went on to address the use of the "internal" vs "external" dichotomy to be a "recent one, popularized by scholars who were not professional martial artists." He challenged the ascribing of "spiritual beliefs and philosophical qualities" by these intellectuals who applied these "to their martial arts of choice." Fish proposes that this was done in "order to lend some intellectual legitimacy to the practice of what were supposed to be the efficient ways of killing or disabling an enemy." However, there is another possible explanation to the dichotomization of internal and external martial arts. This has to do with a special and distinct meaning of Taoist based martial arts that I will discuss later in this article.

Another viewpoint was best stated by a good friend and fellow martial artist. This view is that all martial arts have the potential to be internal and that "internal" to him meant a special kind of mental state which harmonized with physical expression. He cited Mohammed Ali as an external boxer who was able to box according to internal principles.

There is another view of the meaning of internal martial arts which is the focus of the present article. The terminology may have been selected to refer to a specific methodology which could be applied to the arts of Pa Kua, Tai Chi, and Hsing-I. This methodology could be seen as an evolution in the practice of martial arts where spiritual benefits and philosophical orientation is the root of this definition.

The use of the term "internal" became publicly known as a reference for certain styles of martial arts after use by Cheng Ting-Hua and his associates in the late 1800's (see *Pa Kua Chang Journal*, Volume 3, Number 2). The term may have been intended to identify potential methodology common to Hsing-I, Pa Kua, and Tai Chi. The use of

the term "internal" was widespread in China centuries before the advent of "internal" boxing and used as a label for energetic based practice methods. In Chinese these methods were called *nei tan* or "inner alchemy." They addressed the idea of conserving and transforming ch'i in the body. This term was used since at least the Tang Dynasty. There are books such as the *Fu Nei Yuan Ch'i Ching* (Manual of Absorbing the Internal Ch'i of Primary Vitality) and others dating from that time which discuss "moving" and transforming the *nei ch'i*, or "inner ch'i." These concepts formed the basis of a Taoist gymnastic tradition called *Tao Yin*. The theory governing this tradition hold that ch'i in the body could be obstructed by "gates" and other blockages along energetic channels. Exercises were created to encourage the unencumbered flow of life energy. Physiotherapeutics were performed to make the body "more supple and to rest it." Adepts believed the result of these exercises was to produce longevity or even physical immortality. *Nei Tan* adepts sought to restore pure yang and pure yin. The 10th century Taoists used the Eight Trigrams (Pa Kua) model to pursue this goal and achieve alchemical blending of the Eight Trigram aspects within the body. (As a side-note, there are records, such as the *Lieh Hsien Ch'uan Ch'uan*,



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which suggest that the legendary founder of Tai Chi, Chang San-Feng, was a physiological alchemist in early Ming times.)

The point of all of this is that the term *nei chia*, when the masters of these styles applied it to a group of boxing arts, may have been intended to identify a potential methodology inherent in their styles consistent with the *nei tan* philosophy of physical alchemy. Thus, it would be wrong to too quickly assume this terminology to have been chosen arbitrarily or for the sake of convenience. I believe the labeling of "internal martial arts" refers to adaptation (or recognition) of Taoist alchemical methods inherent in specific boxing styles.

If my assumption is true, this represented a shift in orientation at the zenith of martial arts development in Beijing, an important center for martial arts development. This new "advanced" category of "internal" martial arts - particularly Pa Kua (which was still developing at this time) - was designed to transform and transmute the ch'i. The development of ch'i, traditional medicine, and martial arts came together to foster yogic aspects of training. Support of this idea was given by an article in the *Pa Kua Chang Journal*, Volume 3, Number 4, where the case was made for the roots of Pa Kua with its characteristic circle walking being a meditative technique developed by Taoists. Interestingly, there is evidence that Tung Hai-Ch'uan was a member of a Taoist sect that practiced these methods of "spiritual alchemy." This is important.

If an association was made between the physical discipline of martial art, mind state, and transformation of ch'i in the body, and assuming the idea of ch'i in the body is real and more than only a theoretical construct, it represents a significant evolution in martial art practice. This step could be compared to the discovery and control of electricity in history and be the single most important discovery in martial arts since its development. It is problematic in that if this discovery was made its abstract nature would require above average intelligence to develop theory and it would also need a label to describe it. Applying Taoist *Nei Tan* principles to the practice of martial arts would be a reason for selecting the term "internal" or "internal family." (It is interesting that *nei chia* could be translated as "internalist.")

The martial arts of Hsing-I, Tai Chi, and even some Pa Kua, had been taught for many years as strictly physical traditions along the lines of Shaolin. Teaching the average unsophisticated martial artist of the early 1900s about the abstract notion of ch'i and alchemy would be as futile as teaching the untutored farmers of the 1800's about the theory of electro-magnetism. What information did pass to common martial artists of the turn of the century often was applied as superstitious belief thought to give magical properties. For example, during the boxer rebellion many "peasant boxers" believed that their ch'i would protect their bodies against the effects of bullets. Thus, it could be postulated that the development of "yogic" internal alchemy in the martial arts was restricted to a small group of boxers. This breed of boxer would possess depth and intelligence and often would have interest in medicine and philosophy. By this definition, a Hsing-I, Tai Chi, or Pa Kua bodyguard type would not necessarily be an internal boxer. A new breed of boxer came into being who, due to the complexity of the subject,

would be limited in number.

If the above is true it could be suggested that not every lineage of Tai Chi, Pa Kua, or Hsing-I is necessarily "internal." By this definition an internal art would have elements of yogic practice and concern with ch'i transformation and would have the potential to spiritualize martial practice.

Personally, I have searched for this alchemical mystery in my practice. Some of my students have been successful in developing internal alchemical boxing skills. This training seeks to unify meditation and Chinese medicine with physical training. Below is an outline of the training we use.

These are the goals of practice at the Hsing Chen School:

1) Practice Soft Termination - Never stiffen on impact when delivering a strike. Use only the minimal strength required to maintain structure and alignment. This allows the ch'i to flow. The musculature is relaxed and loose. The assumption is that looseness and "relaxedness" has much to do with the transformation and extension of ch'i.

2) Train to Sense the Ch'i - Develop the ability to feel ch'i and mentally direct its movement. Ch'i feels like an electrical current.

3) Practice Hidden Power - Alchemically based power should not be obvious to the untrained observer.

4) Calmness in Movement - Even in combat the ideal of mental calmness should be kept. This allows for the unimpeded flow of ch'i.

5) Train Short Power Ability - A relaxed hand, arm, elbow, or other weapon should be trained to deliver a power that feels like a heavy club or metal rod strike from a few inches away from the target.

Most of us already practice alchemical methods. These occur in *I Ch'uan*, internal style slow practice and are especially apparent in *Chan Chuang* or "standing practice." In practice such as these we feel the electrical-like tingling and warmth in our hands and throughout our body. We learn to control these sensations with our intent. This is alchemical practice which allows our energetic channels to open, lower blood pressure and rejuvenates mind and body. This is one facet of *Nei Tan* Taoist alchemy. This may have been a discovery made in martial arts circles at the height of boxing in China and why the term "internal boxing" came into vogue.

As we grapple with unraveling the secrets of past masters, the idea of understanding internal boxing as inner alchemy gives us clues for not only understanding what they found through their practice, but provides implications for this discovery to understand mind-body link and health improvement. What to you think?

Chinese Character Index

服內元氣經	Fu Nei Yuan Ch'i Ching
內丹	Nei Tan
道引	Tao Yin
列仙全傳	Lieh Hsien Ch'uan Ch'uan